

Conversation

Jacques Herzog

Pierre de Meuron

Jean-François Chevrier

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Jean-François Chevrier: In the essay at the start of this book I suggested, somewhat provocatively, that architecture is an “opportunistic profession.” You invent forms that address the public sphere. They contribute to a common, shared context to the extent that the public can take possession of them beyond their original function. Like Aldo Rossi, you consider the monument a form of permanence in an urban context whose function can change. This is the idea underlying your stadium in Beijing.

Jacques Herzog: Yes. Now, in post-Olympic times, the Bird’s Nest is really working very well. It’s used for various events but also simply as a park. We designed it with that in mind.

JFC: But you had to negotiate. You don’t bow to political or financial interests; you don’t let yourself be tied hand and foot. You manage to acquire some leeway, and within certain limits you are even able to modify the program. But, of course, you have to operate within a given framework; you do have to take political interests or financial criteria into account that don’t necessarily coincide with your own. The Beijing stadium is a good example, and I don’t think that Unibail’s explicitly commercial program for the Triangle tower in Paris was completely satisfactory for you, either.

JH: Unlike an artist, an architect works under predefined conditions: there is a subject, a program, and a location. We can’t afford to be “opportunistic” under those circumstances. Why? Opportunists willingly make compromises to guarantee their personal profit. We have a pretty clear idea of the prospect and potential of every single project and are prepared to do everything in our power to make it come about. We don’t do that for ourselves but to do justice to the needs of the project and its users. Architecture is successful if people love, accept, and use it—not just now but for generations to come. To achieve this goal, a given program often has to be questioned and redefined, and the job of doing that is a key moment in the genesis of any project. Instead of opportunism, you could perhaps speak of tactical skill.

Pierre de Meuron: In coming to terms with increasingly complex and unpredictable contexts and planning, it makes sense to add tactical skills to our mental systems of orientation and strategic intelligence. A project rarely follows a neat, straightforward course, like water in a channeled river; on the contrary, there are cross currents, diversions,

and lateral interference. You move forward and backward, doubts follow achievements, and conversely. Such intentional or unexpected deviations can actually be beneficial to a project. Confronted with the complexity of political, economic, and cultural realities, we have to react and take action even when a situation is open to interpretation. All those involved in a project invariably develop their own ideas and make assumptions of which they may be unaware. That leads to differences in interpretation and their inevitable consequences: misunderstandings, discrepancies, controversies, arguments, and conflicts. In such cases, it is imperative to be realistic, not in opportunistic terms but rather in the complex sense of the term: that means understanding the unpredictable and ambiguous nature of a project and joining forces to develop strategies, somewhat like Japanese martial arts. You have to grasp certain possibilities in time, which may not have been discovered at the beginning, and exploit them to benefit the project. In this respect I would speak of opportunities.

p. 12 JH: Take the example of Roche. Was it opportunism for us to accept a new, simpler, and less iconic project, one that is basically inscribed in the tradition of the modernist syntax characteristic of the Roche premises in Basel? The opportunist would be content just to have the chance to put up buildings. But the project for Roche is about rethinking what's going on around it: a new, vibrant boulevard, a new park,
p. 232 a new relationship to the Rhine.

p. 13 JFC: In our conversation of August 10, 2010, Pierre said the client wanted the project simplified; you were disappointed at first but then it ended up being better. Can you elaborate on that?

PdM: Everyone agrees—at least at first sight—that the initial proposal was more innovative and inventive. But, of course, innovation is not the one and only criterion. The client felt that the conspicuous shape of the building did not adequately reflect the Roche image. The president of Roche did not want his firm represented by a building that he considered too spectacular. As he put it, he wanted something “more modest,” “more reserved,” “more classical.” The client intervened on an aesthetic level that is ordinarily the domain of the architect—and in this case, he turned out to be right. Accepting the client's opinion was not opportunistic but opportune. Had the tower been built after the original design, it would have been innovative, beautiful, and complex in shape, but it would also have remained a singular building. It would

not have been integrated into the surroundings, marked by buildings with a simpler geometry. Variations on the form would have been difficult and would not have worked so well within the context of Roche's ongoing urban development.

JH: The overall appearance of the new tower is reminiscent of postwar modernism. The horizontal bands echo the vocabulary of the 1960s and 1970s. This conventional form, at once simple and iconic, is intentional. The maker, that is the architect, has withdrawn into the background. In the interior, the sky lobbies are open spaces over three floors, stacked one on top of the other. This particularly innovative device is actually an improvement on the first project inasmuch as it ensures an outdoor terrace on practically every floor. It ultimately makes the interior life of the tower more significant and radical than in the first version. The latter was undoubtedly more iconic, but in terms of space it was less innovative than the built version. p. 12, 98-99,
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We knew that the premises of Roche were going to grow but we did not know the extent and density that would be involved. The project as a whole generates an urban scale unprecedented in Switzerland. For one thing, a building will be constructed that is taller than the current tower. We have always advocated an increase in density along the Rhine. This is exactly what the Roche project does, for which reason it is also very important to us. On studying the brochures that we had made on various Roche projects over the years, Pierre and I realized that we were losing control, that we were applying our own conventions without rethinking them in the context of the city. p. 124-125

In our current collaboration with Roche, it was understood from the outset that the new buildings had to be perceived as an extension of the work begun by Otto Salvisberg. He designed the first master plan in the 1930s, and his student Roland Rohn continued in that vein in the 1950s. Salvisberg's modernist traditionalism is the architectural foundation of Roche in Basel. The basic master plan, with its square blocks, is a given, but the density and height of the buildings, set to be constructed over the next ten years, is unique in Basel and, in fact, in Switzerland. The framework of the master plan is no longer adequate; architecture has to be designed that suits the scale of a metropolis; a new topography is being created that will emerge out of the center of the city.

PdM: In the early 2000s, the management of Roche asked us to develop a new master plan for the entire site and to define the location of



ABOVE: Enlargement of green space, plan from the urban planning study for the Roche Basel Site, Basel, 2001–2005

BELOW: Sculpture by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Rock on Top of Another Rock* (2015), on the forecourt of Roche Building 1, Roche Basel Site, Grenzacherstrasse, September 2015. [PDM]

Building 1. One of the buildings was in bad repair and had to be torn down. We defined the south section “corporate” and the north section “pharma.” We took the entire area into account rather than focusing only on the Roche site. It seemed obvious that we had to work with the continuity of Solitude Park, which borders the street next to Museum Tinguely. The park now extends into the Roche site, where we have called it “Garden,” and to the street itself, which was broadened to make room for numerous plantings. We have tried to merge the public park and the street into one entity. At first, the client was reticent to invest in public space, and the cantonal architect, who preferred a classic lane with trees, was against the idea.

Grenzacherstrasse, which runs through the site, follows the course of the Rhine after the German border. Having crossed the major trans-European north-south axis, it traverses the Roche site premises flanked by company buildings. Like Novartis, Roche could have asked to have the road integrated into the site and the traffic redirected. Instead, we suggested moving the boundaries of the grounds back several meters. The site remains closed for security reasons, but the three meters that were added to the street freed everything up. The buildings are now located in public space. This is a gesture of great significance. p. 128–131, 135

We persuaded the client to introduce small green islets. In addition, we noticed that there was an urban sequence accentuated by sculptures, to which we added substantially: the sculpture by Fischli/Weiss at the base of the tower, below the cantilever, responds to those by Jean Tinguely and Bernhard Luginbühl next to the Museum Tinguely, which in turn respond to those by Henry Moore and Hans Arp in the garden of the historical headquarters of Hoffmann-La Roche, visible from the street. The street becomes a path that crosses a park.

This idea goes back to Building 92, our first contribution to the Roche site in 1995. We already realized back then that Grenzacherstrasse had the potential of being a public space that goes beyond its use as a street that cuts through the Roche site. Building 92 houses laboratories, a library, an auditorium, and the auditorium lobby; the plan was to place all of these elements inside the site. Instead, we suggested a kind of castling: using the rook, in this case the tower, to protect the king, as in chess! We then turned the communal spaces around to face the street, to give the building a lively, animated street front. p. 129–139

JH: The city is the street, and the street is stores, restaurants, and bars, even in Switzerland, which is not the most urbane of countries. Twelve thousand people work at the Roche site; that’s the population of a small

town. The site of the other large pharmaceutical company, Novartis, includes an entire ensemble of facilities to meet the everyday needs of its employees: stores, dry cleaners, a dozen high-end restaurants. But the area is closed off. We wanted to put Roche in contact with the city by moving it closer to the street. Now the buildings themselves mark the border of the premises and the barriers around them have been eliminated. This simple gesture has restored the continuity between architecture and urban space. It is a sculptural gesture: the base of the statue has been removed so that it now stands on the terra firma of everyday life.

PdM: From the beginning we also advocated preserving some of the existing buildings. Roche opposes having any buildings historically listed to prevent later intervention, but it has nonetheless adopted a policy of preserving certain historical layers in order to safeguard the company's cultural identity. This aspect proved to be of great relevance in negotiating with the city about limiting and defining not only public spaces but also other urban and architectural elements of the project.

JFC: We (Élia Pijollet and I) were deeply impressed with the project you completed in collaboration with Rémy Zaugg, which convinced us that color can have an extraordinary impact on the definition of an architectural space in terms of inside and outside, private and public. The building was open to the city even as it affirmed its spatial autonomy. This balance is vital for any architecture that must be a shelter, an inward-looking location, and an "urban element" (in the sense intended by Aldo Rossi), all at once. The museum is exemplary in this respect, which you demonstrate in the extension for the Musée Unterlinden in Colmar: it is to be a showcase for Grünewald's altarpiece and the accompanying collections, a space of transit connecting heterogeneous buildings that correspond to rather diverse layers of history, but also a redevelopment of the urban landscape that had been neglected in this area on the edge of the city's historic center. Such projects, in which interaction with the urban environment is as important as the shape of the building itself, carry special conditions. You often say that the client's role during the course of a project is decisive and that most of your good projects have benefited from dialogue with the client.

p. 252 JH: A lot of these projects have become very visible: the Tate, Prada Aoyama, the Dominus Winery... The clients were exacting and

insightful. In the case of Roche, it is the corporate culture that comes into play. In retrospect, the rejection of the first proposal for the tower project was self-evident. At any rate, the ideal relationship with a client does not mean *carte blanche* but rather radical experimentation that fruitfully exploits the knowledge of both parties.

JFC: Hearing you explain it, it seems that the president of Roche was right to reject your first proposal for a spiral tower, because he was thinking about the logic of his business that ultimately corresponds to a desirable development approach to both the site and the city in general. You ultimately agreed with the president of Roche on an urban truth, just as you had with the mayor of Colmar.

PdM: It was different in Colmar because the *entente* between architect and client was based on the decision of a jury in a public competition. In contrast, Roche was a commissioned project; that is, the management selected an architect rather than an anonymously submitted design.

JH: The truth is there was a problem with the spiral tower project. The form was poorly developed, the building became swollen, and it ended up resembling a sausage! If it had been built like that, we would have had to invent a new spiral for the second tower, whereas the current project for Building 2 will more simply and appropriately complement the Basel landscape: we will build a second, higher, tower that will relate to the current pyramid of Building 1. With the first project, we would have created a spectacular sculptural effect in the style of Shanghai, Abu Dhabi, or Dubai, but Basel, with its Protestant background, has a different history. The spectacular nature of the building would have pleased people, at least at the beginning, but it might also have been criticized for contradicting the spirit of the city. Who can tell? At any rate, the current project aims to create a new topography as much as a new image. In one sense it confirms our idea that cities are “specific” and certainly not “generic”—as claimed in the wake of globalization.¹

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JFC: In short, dialogue with the client can at times bring out a quality of the project specific to the situation and to the sociocultural conditions. The key concept of a project can come very quickly, but in the case of Roche the solution became evident in counter to the original plan, in keeping with a tradition and a knowledge inscribed in the landscape, in the geographic memory, of which the client was the conduit. But can



we talk of a truth or an objective quality that depends on the genius loci of a place, which is imposed on the participants in a project?

JH: We don't let our buildings just stand for themselves alone, we talk about them; in other words, there is a "verbal" aspect to the architecture of Herzog & de Meuron, as demonstrated by numerous texts, conversations, essays, etc. We talk about what we do and we want others to talk about it too; we welcome open and impartial debate.

We keep emphasizing the specifically physical aspect of architecture. But architecture is also intellectually informed in the sense that it produces thoughts and ideas that can be explained by the concrete reality of a project. The more you talk about it, the more elements and details you can discover that contribute to understanding and defining what we do, for instance by explaining and defining an idea, as we just did with respect to your suggestion of "opportunism." The meanings of words are not fixed but you can try to pin them down when applied to a concrete project. It is more interesting to analyze projects in order to define words and concepts than the other way around.

PdM: To clarify the question of objectivity, I would say that in the case of Roche common ground was indeed found. The president of Roche had always expressed the need for a rational approach: he wants to follow a chain of clear, comprehensible arguments that will lead him from A to Z, all the way to a solution. This is important to him, not only to assist in making decisions after shared consultations but also to enable him to provide information about the project and communicate it to others. He doesn't want to impose subjective judgments. Similarly, we don't want to make decisions based simply on a whim. Our decisions must have a rationale, which allows us to communicate them and, if need be, call them into question.

JFC: In Colmar, the strength of the new building, with its hipped gable roof, its brick cladding, the way in which it corresponds to the chapel, is an architectural invention. But the strength of the project is urban. When we visited the site in August 2009, at the beginning of the competition, you immediately noted the importance of giving back to the museum the space occupied at the time by the bus station, of integrating a passage and a public space between the buildings. This aspect of the project shows an analogy with Roche. The urban quality of the project is closely related to formal invention and that explains the enthusiastic support of the client. A consonance with urban memory

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is what I call objectivity or truth. The building is not only a morphological performance, it also unharnesses an urban force, and hence a collective force with which one can identify.

JH: We are extremely interested in urban forces of that kind—often eclipsed in the long term by the consequences of transformation and change. That interest is demonstrated in projects dating from the
 p. 225 beginning of our career, for instance the Marktplatz in Basel of 1979. This urban and architectural approach to the physical reality and energy of cities is diametrically opposed to the debate on the disappearance of “reality” that marked the 1980s and 1990s, especially in France. The Lyotard exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, *Les Immatériaux* [The Immaterials], was terrific, but the transfer of these ideas to the architectural sphere had a devastating effect; many architects found themselves at an impasse. They thought they would be able to create a new kind of architecture without accepting its most basic and banal conditions: materials, reality, and weight, in short, its archaic nature. The 9/11 attacks brought all of that to an abrupt end. In one single, violent blow, we were once again made painfully aware of reality as such and the fragility of cities.

JFC: That raises the question of risk. It is often said that architects are too quick to take action, that they take ill-considered risks and don’t pay enough attention to technical issues. The decision to build an underground gallery, under a canal, as you did in Colmar, could be deemed an ill-considered risk of that kind, which, incidentally, really displeased the Service des Musées de France. And it is indeed a risk: there is no 100 percent guarantee that the water will never enter. Even so, it is justified by the fact that the gallery is indispensable to the project and its urban significance.

PdM: What you address is a risk that is very specific to Colmar. As I said, it was a competition. Our initial project proposed two entrances for the museum. But then it became clear that a single entrance was not negotiable. Naturally, we studied other possibilities, like a bridge across the street, but that would have impacted the public space on the new plaza. Finally we came up with the idea of linking the two parts of the museum underground, not as a mono-functional corridor but in the form of a gallery. The underground gallery meets the requirements of the program, which specifies that a link is indispensable to guarantee the economically and organizationally more practical

solution of only one entrance, one box office, and one cloakroom. While the project was under construction, the Logelbach canal flooded the underground gallery, a vexing incident with a beneficial side effect. It enabled us to evaluate the risk of flooding and work out possible solutions. In the process, we learned that the technical services of the city of Colmar had been unable to open and close the sluices. An electronic control system was actually in place but was out of order, causing the construction site to be flooded. To minimize the risk, we analyzed the situation, evaluated possible measures, and were able, in this way, to guarantee the best possible protection for the underground galleries and the works of art.

JH: These are technical issues. They can largely be resolved, not by guaranteeing total security, but by keeping potential damage in check. Without maintenance, the water would eventually enter the gallery, but there would also be leaks in the roof of the chapel. There were once clear-cut, standardized solutions for these technical questions in the days when traditions were passed down by architects from generation to generation. There was little experimentation, little risk, but all the more knowledge and experience. A perfect world of architecture. It is a fabulous myth and, for the most part, it even corresponds to reality. In this ideal world, in this state of innocence, everything was based on technical, functional, and aesthetic experience; no one tried to do things differently. Industrialization and modernity produced a new type of artist and architect. Le Corbusier, Mies, and other protagonists of modernism broke with tradition. The quality of the architect, like that of the artist, was defined by the ability to be innovative, to be creative, to be different and specific, a tendency that has taken a pronounced radical turn over the past two decades.

It is a logic that now seems to have run aground. For the past generation, no significant architects have emerged in the United States because the majority of young practitioners disappears into large firms. Rampant regulations and norms reduce “artistic freedom” to a minimum, while the risks and responsibilities of architectural offices have increased. The aim is zero risk and the process of innovation grinds to a halt. This marks both the end of innovation and of star architecture.

Looking back on the pop, the sexual revolution, drugs, etc. of the 1960s, everything was risk. Pierre and I benefited from the atmosphere, the freedom, but we were also aware of the limitations. Young people can no longer define themselves in this way, even if they wanted to.

The zeitgeist has arrested any willingness to take risks. Like the truth of the land, the cultural climate is also an indisputable reality. The tendency toward zero risk is a tricky issue and obstructs innovation.

PdM: We have to distinguish between different kinds of risk. Some risks are hard to grasp at first, but once they are they can be controlled. For us that means developing an architectural concept without knowing the outcome. It is almost a condition of fruitful collaboration for clients to be prepared and capable of accepting this risk during the design phase. If they work with Herzog & de Meuron, they accept the open-ended process of working out a concept that makes it possible to uncover the surprising, unanticipated potential that basically lies in every project. I think there is more quality architecture in Basel than elsewhere because of the distinctive psychology here. Clients are prepared to take considerable but calculated risks; the chairman of
 p. 97 Actelion, for instance: he had no idea what kind of building he was going to move into. A bank or an insurance company would be less likely to assume that risk. To a certain extent, I think that explains the difference between Basel (a city of research) and Zurich (a city of banks and insurance companies). This is further illustrated by Hans Schmidt, who was active in both cities. In Zurich he built canopies to
 p. 162-169 protect the facades and windows; he did not do that in Basel, where he designed a clearer form. He was able to take a greater risk, presumably with the consent of the client.

JFC: Capitalism in its current, neoliberal form generates risk on a massive scale through speculation, endless deregulation that kills work, and so on. But while bigwigs take those risks, which have considerable destructive impact on the community (though not, in the first instance, on themselves), we wish to stamp out even the slightest uncertainty: one must eliminate all accidents, meet standards, do everything by the book. The consequences are catastrophic in both cases. Where does the architect stand between these two extremes?

JH: We are gravitating toward an increasingly conventional and standardized world. Risk is in decline. Those who assume maximum risk through speculation—the banks and the insurance companies—are the same ones who want to eliminate risk in the arts and society. The world of finance represents a huge destructive danger, but it is in large part virtual and dematerialized. The world of architecture is archaic, physical. This is the world we live in, but the conditions are

defined by the laws of global capitalism: there is no one to turn to. The situation caused by globalization is out of control. It is a Pandora's Box.

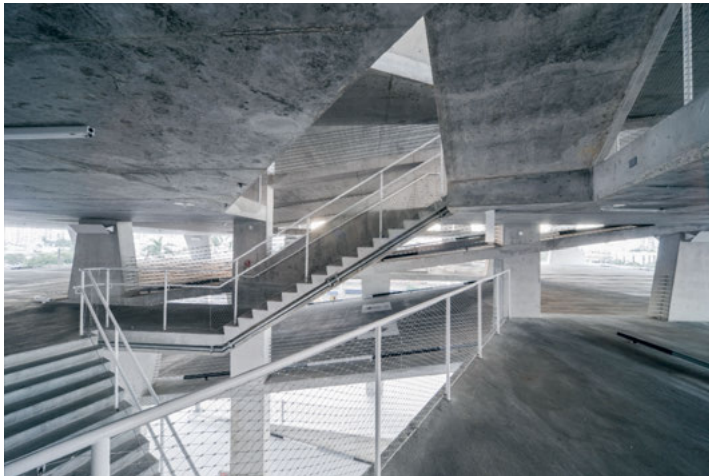
PdM: The worst thing about risk is not being aware of it. However, once you are, you can evaluate its extent and work out necessary measures to keep it in check. Regarding modes of construction and details, the use and durability of materials are an important consideration. How do you proceed to ensure that a building in a particular city or a particular country is best suited to its purpose, its users, and the local environmental conditions? The damage quota is extremely small for projects built by Herzog & de Meuron. We obviously have insurance for certain contingencies, but not for going over budget or past deadline. Fortunately, we have rarely had to file any claims, so that we have even had refunds and our rates are quite low for our field. It's just an administrative point but it's significant.

Ordinarily we do a lot of preliminary testing; we build prototypes and full-scale models. For the last Ricola project, we used rammed earth as a construction material, which is unusual for a building of that size. We had already planned to do so for the Schaulager, but at the time we felt the risk was too great. In this case, we did take the risk but only after a number of full-scale tests and by enlisting the best possible professional support and outside expertise. As mentioned above, there are different kinds of risk. Risk can also apply to the choice of form: you have to be aware of it, take it into account, and accept it. If you follow your own taste and personal preferences, it will probably not take long for the building to age and be outmoded. Individually, you have to take a critical approach, but processes of collective evaluation are also required.

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JFC: In 2006, in the course of one of our conversations, Jacques made a remarkable comment that attracted a lot of attention: "It is difficult for us to say, 'That's the form I want, no doubt about it.' Ornament has helped us overcome the obstacle of form. When we discovered Arab architecture, we soon realized that it was a means of overcoming or even suppressing form. Ornament plays with doubt." Overcoming the obstacle of form: there's an ambiguity in that statement that I didn't understand at the time. What it means is "overcoming the difficulty of defining form" or "overcoming the obsession of form."

JH: The two meanings coexist. Sometimes it really is hard for us to decide on a form, definitively, once and for all. Very often in a project



there's something about the surface or the structure that bothers us and that helps to define the external form, but it also generates a certain indeterminacy. Going into "depth" in experimenting with a surface is something that we started doing in our very first projects. In the purer forms that have emerged more recently (Miami, Beijing, the stadium in Bordeaux, Novartis, Ricola, and so on), surface, space, structure, and ornament are one and the same thing. Every element is structural, contributes to defining the space, and can be perceived as an ornamental part of the whole. p. 244

JFC: I think that today good architects, as indeed good artists, think twice about adding new objects to the world. But they do it anyway because they have to, out of personal necessity. There is thus a fundamental tension here.

PdM: We can take the example of our recent project for Vitra, the Schaudapot. Initially, Rolf Fehlbaum said he didn't want a symbolic, iconic building, defined by its form. He wanted an invisible project. Our first thought was to build something underground, then we considered prefabricated architecture without an author, as it were. This forced us to think about invisibility. You can't do nothing: if you need four walls and a roof, they must have an expression; you have to give them a form. We proposed an archetype, a fundamental form of architecture: four walls, a gabled roof. The choice of material—broken brick—and the way it is applied define both structure and ornament. Had we used corrugated iron, the building would be completely different. p. 89

JH: Le Corbusier was a painter, sculptor, and architect. It is said that he dedicated his mornings to the drawing table. This produced Ronchamp, Chandigarh, and La Tourette: the architect as a creator of form. I think it is difficult to work like that today. So then what? We realized from the beginning, even with the Blue House, that resorting to an archetype can be an excuse: you don't have to worry about form. That was a discovery for us. I often say that we are conceptual architects: form is invariably a consequence of the concept and not of the need to carve or chisel. It is reflection that generates the form. But I don't rule out the activity of the sculptor who cuts, shapes, assembles. Sometimes it is interesting to reverse the process. If you use a pure pyramid or a pure sphere, you are presenting a very strong form, with a strong symbolic character, but you're not the author: you have decided to use that shape, but you haven't created it. The project for p. 87



the Serpentine Pavilion in London was based on archeology; it was an excuse to not create a form.

JFC: This reticence with regard to form and formal invention is practically a law of modern art. It is Duchamp's response to Picasso. Mallarmé had earlier written, "Nature exists, and cannot be added to; apart from cities, railway lines, and several inventions of our making."² Since the end of the nineteenth century there has been a fundamental tension within modernism between the reticence to add anything to the existing world and the enduring need to produce new objects (if only new equipment, as Mallarmé says). In the field of architecture, the anthropological necessity is probably that of shelter. Shelter becomes a house, and, as you yourselves have shown, even the simplest form of a house is an architectural argument.

JH: The architect practically always adds something. We learned about the environmental idea of "the smallest possible intervention" from the sociologist Lucius Burckhardt, who was our professor in Zurich in 1971–1972. Burckhardt was radical; he was a very political thinker. We were both fascinated and repelled. We are acutely aware of how much we benefited in our studies from two diametrically opposed philosophies: Lucius Burckhardt and Aldo Rossi. Over the years, this conflict of ideas has proven extremely productive.

JFC: The thought that it is absurd to keep adding things to our planet, things that are destructive, is becoming increasingly important. Congestion is a major risk; one need only think of the storage of nuclear waste. If you think of nature as a dynamic force, you can observe how humankind is trying to oppose it.

PdM: But a volcano is also a destructive force, and tectonic shifts, too.

JFC: Sade used the volcano as a metaphor for the human capacity to destroy, which he held up in opposition to the Enlightenment. But this destructive capacity is positive. Destruction can no doubt be a vital factor in the creative process, but that is different from destruction carried out by those who think in terms of addition and accumulation. What is destructive today is blind accumulation without even looking to destroy. But I would like to return to this tension that, to me, is such a fundamental aspect of modern times. Duchamp versus Picasso. Starting there, how does this tension function for you today, concretely? You

now have a much greater capacity for bringing new things into the world, to the point where you can change what your native city looks like.

JH: The visibility of a building like the Roche tower was a great responsibility. Now we know that it works. I honestly would have preferred to transform the city by developing it horizontally, to the north, with new neighborhoods. This will happen someday; I would have liked to make more change in this direction, but the democratic decision-making process is very slow. To the south, in the Dreispitz area, we have generated possibilities for horizontal urban development. The Roche tower is different in that the verticality of the tower is a solution to a concrete problem, that of a company that has a great need for expansion but wants to stay in the same location. The project is a clear-cut manifestation of this fact.

JFC: You wrote that New York and Venice are cities that have become landscape. This is what you are doing in Basel with these two projects: you are creating the city as landscape; strong forms produce the landscape that ultimately absorbs them. The Messe, the trade fair building, is a new dynamic element in the urban landscape. Seen from the Clarastrasse, it seems to cross the city, as a continuous line. It's an apparition, an imaginary form, almost hallucinatory.

JH: I think that may have contributed to the acceptance of the unusual size of the building. It's not static and heavy, it's more like a train passing by on the German railroad tracks that used to run through the site. It's not an object that is dramatically pitted against its background; it's not an object sitting in the landscape but rather both form and landscape at once. It's a new piece of urban landscape.

JFC: It seems to me that something similar is going on in Dreispitz. The building is very surprising. It is a carved block with an immense pedestal housing the firm's archives. Though the form is strong, contradicting many of the preexisting elements of the site, it is not aggressive. Why?

PdM: It is a district of warehouses, of freight, of commerce. The scale is completely different from that of a traditional neighborhood that combines housing, offices, and shops. It's a site of heavy loads and freight trains. The building unites two worlds: an industrial, logistical

world and a domestic, residential world. We have demonstrated that this is possible, and we are betting on the fact that the neighborhood will continue to expand in this way. The use of concrete might have seemed aggressive, but it isn't. I think that is partially due to the curve, which was suggested by the shape of the plot.

JFC: The building gives the appearance of a pedestal on which something has been placed: it's not a blind object that is just there, like a sculpture by Tony Smith. It has a figurative dimension, somewhat like a mirror image of the expansive landscape around it. And it makes you wonder what's inside that pedestal, all the more so because it's in a warehouse district. It can't be an ordinary warehouse, but it doesn't look like apartments either. This enigma, the question of the interior, humanizes the relationship to the building. As with the Messe, it is ultimately an example of a very assertive form that dissolves into the landscape.

PdM: The pedestal is not a completely solid wall; there are some windows that create a relationship between interior and exterior and prevent the building from becoming too imposing or monumental. When you try to photograph or sketch the building, there are distortions that are difficult to figure out. The cage of the upper section, if one can call it that, has a different geometry from the base. It is there that the curve comes into play, especially in how it combines with the slope of the south and north facades.

JFC: But all of these remarks bring us back to the issue of housing. You studied social architecture of the 1920s and 1930s, especially in Basel. The goal was to make (quality) architecture for everyone. Pierre refurbished a Hans Schmidt house and lived in it. But you don't build social housing. Why? p. 156-185
p. 170-175

JH: Social housing has been sequestered by investors. The specifications of the commission we were given in 1996 for social housing on the Rue des Suisses in Paris were closely related to those of the 1920s and 1930s, which gave us a certain leeway in designing a really attractive and affordable place to live in the middle of Paris. Investors are ordinarily only interested in high-end residential towers because they use the architect's name to sell luxury products. Social housing concerns people who don't have any money. We have been thrust into a world of iconic architecture. Iconic architecture reflects the growing p. 20, 165



importance of the investor as the main player in global architectural production. We are, however, currently working on several small housing projects, for instance, a block of apartments for middle-income residents in a park in Uster, near Zurich. The project is in the hands of a single private investor, a framework that allows for a lot of creativity.

PdM: This is also related to the question of risk and innovation. Innovation is practically nonexistent in social housing, especially here in Switzerland, where there are no quotas as in the United Kingdom, for instance. Most moderately priced apartments in Basel are found in buildings from the nineteenth century, so there is no purpose-built social housing here. Besides, social housing is fully regulated, especially in France, but in other countries as well: the doors, the ceiling height, the number of showers and toilets, everything is specified, fixed, so there is no wiggle room.

JFC: So you can't inherit what's gone before. You can look at this architecture or live in it, as Pierre has, or you can study it closely, but there is a break with the past. It's sad.

PdM: In Natal, a city in northern Brazil, we built a gym in the middle of a favela in collaboration with a Swiss foundation. It's a place where people can meet and engage in exchange. It's true, we do not actively seek out social projects; we could be criticized for that. But if we were asked to develop social housing, under similar circumstances, we would certainly accept. p. 24

JFC: In urban terms, this is largely a question of combining density and lacunae. I am talking about creating breathing spaces, openings, of breaking down barriers. To compensate for the lack of social architecture, we could create social space, holes in the urban fabric, open spaces, spaces without a name. I am thinking, for example, of the Voltaplatz, not far from your office, which is a very lively area, between a slightly rundown neighborhood and the Novartis campus.

PdM: It is remarkable that this square has attracted your attention, and I agree with you that, no matter how great a city's density, it's important to ensure the survival of undefined locations to which no function has been assigned.



JFC: This corresponds to a theme of opened and closed, inside and outside, which is omnipresent in your architecture and which, it seems to me, merges with the model of nature. You first interpreted the model of the crystalized form, reminiscent of Beuys's romantic inspiration, but you couple that with your exploration of surfaces. You treat them like skin, which is more like a painting. But the skin is not simply a surface placed on top of an interior; it qualifies the site as a place of shelter and presumes a dialogue with the interior. p. 80-86

JH: Inside and outside were already closely aligned in the stone house in Liguria. Unfortunately, we have hardly any photographs of the interior. The four-part composition of the rooms with no hallways mirrors the outside. p. 94-95

The interior of the Blue House is also very precise, like a piece of furniture. We have always been aware that the interior is as interesting and important as the exterior, but it was only later that we had the opportunity to act on that realization. p. 87

It's true that we are known for our work on surfaces, and I don't deny that we have at times focused on the exterior. The building that is truly spectacular in this respect is the first storage building for Ricola. We didn't have access to the interior; it is completely automated with the industrial machinery and inner workings specified by the engineers. But we discovered the incredible quality of the site and understood that we could invent a new space on the outside, between the rock and the building. Our job was to design the exterior, the shell, which is more than a simple skin; it's a minimalist sculpture. I don't remember at what point we realized that the space we wanted to create was not inside but outside. It was the distance between the warehouse and the cliff wall. As a result we were able to create a space that everyone could experience without entering the building. p. 202-203

PdM: In the medieval or classical city, building exteriors, the facades, contribute to defining the spaces "inside" the cities: the streets and squares. As a rule, we prefer these traditional spaces to open spaces that go in all directions.

JFC: It's hard for human beings to think of themselves moving in space and also think at the same time that the body possesses an interior space. Architecture works in both registers.



JH: That's why architecture is an art form that also interests artists, especially in contrast to sculpture, which does not traditionally contain space. You mentioned the Volaplatz, a square that is difficult to define and that is actually distinguished in part by its indefinition. But I am sure one could produce the same effect with a more traditionally defined urban space. The beautiful, old squares in city centers are often lifeless or ruined by ugly facilities and design elements. p. 250

So far we have hardly intervened in the historic center of Basel. For several months, we've been working on a project close to our hearts because it is located on the Barfüsserplatz, in the city center, which is the site we had chosen for our architecture degree project in 1974. The project for the Stadtcasino, a concert hall built in the nineteenth century, involves both destruction and simulation. It will create unexpected spaces and be a source of new urban potential, revealing parts of the city that have long been invisible. This urban gesture might be compared to the steps undertaken for the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar. p. 70-75
p. 236-237

PdM: The first gesture is to relocate the entrance of the concert hall so that it faces the square instead of the adjoining street, as it does now. The layout is little bit like that at Roche, where the entrance and the lively, populated places face the street.

JFC: You work on very different scales. Interiors are generally associated with intimacy. But at the Tate Modern you created an immense, monumental interior that matches the impact of the building within the rather chaotic landscape along the banks of the Thames.

JH: The Tate Modern project was decisive for us inasmuch as it made us work entirely within the scale of the city. The real quality of the project lies in having created an indoor space of urban dimensions, the Turbine Hall, which was not originally planned in the competition brief. We decided to hollow it out, to expose it completely, to let it be what it is, and to use it as a vast entrance hall, which would also be the first exhibition space.

The Tate Modern project made us realize that superficial cosmetics cannot possibly do justice to a monument of such visibility and urban significance. It was a project that compelled the architects to take a radical and precise stand, somewhat like a surgeon before an incisive operation. The Turbine Hall proved to be a bold gesture, and we did

not realize at first that it would have such consequences. In another city, the space would have been inappropriate and disproportionate. This was also an extremely important experience because it enabled us to understand how different cities are—proof again of our thesis that cities are specific and not generic.

¹ Roger Diener, Jacques Herzog, Marcel Meili, Pierre de Meuron, Manuel Herz, Christian Schmid, and Milica Topalovic, *The Inevitable Specificity of Cities*, ed. ETH Studio Basel (Zurich, Lars Müller Publishers, 2015).

² Stéphane Mallarmé, “Music and Literature” (1895), trans. Rosemary Lloyd, in *Mallarmé in Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 2001), p. 37.

